

**The Representation of Female Sexuality in India through the lens of
Bollywood 'Item Songs'**

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Abstract

Music is a significant tool in studying the socio-cultural norms, attitudes and beliefs of a society. Representations of women are often defined by how men view women, or by how society expects women to look and behave. The present study aims to explore the shifting representations of females and female sexuality in India from 1970 to the present through the lens of Bollywood 'item songs'. A Thematic Analysis of the lyrical content of four songs, chosen through purposive sampling technique was carried out. The findings indicate that item songs illustrate a gendered power dynamic, stereotyping and normalisation of rape culture. Given the rising number of cases of violence against women and the internalised objectification of women in Indian society, it is imperative to investigate how such media is influencing individual's values, perceptions and choices. The hypersexualisation and

fixation on women's physical appearance and bodies leads to unrealistic body standards and expectations, which could result in psychological disorders related to eating and body dysphoria. These implications of the study are discussed further.

Keywords

bollywood songs; gender; sexuality; item songs and sociology of music

Introduction

Music is a significant part of life, acting as both a form of expression and framing experiences, perceptions and feelings about the world. Music can be recreational, educational, social, emotional, therapeutic, and spiritual (Hays et al., 2002). It depicts the social and cultural identity and structure of our society (Siddiqi, 2020). Social cognitive theory of Gender Development and Differentiation asserts individuals learn through observation of society and mass media like movies and music; this results in stereotypic ideologies

of gender and relationships. One mode through which such gender-linked roles are acquired is through modelling. Models like parents, peers and teachers, or mass media models like movie stars and singers, provides pervasive modeling of gendered roles and conduct (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Bollywood is the name of the Hindi-language film industry that emerges from Mumbai, India (Childers, 2002). Many statistics attest to the immense popularity of the Bollywood industry. More than 750 movies are produced every year, and more than 13,000 cinemas in India house a daily crush of nearly 15 million people (Childers, 2002). Bollywood movies are famous for their song and dance sequences. In particular, 'item songs' are an integral part of Bollywood movies, which depict famous Bollywood actresses performing seductive and sexual dances for groups of men (Jain et al., 2019). The specific name 'item number' was first used to address famous actresses Malaika Arora and Shilpa Shetty's performances in songs in 1998 and 1999. The phrase 'item song' has since been used to re-label such similar performances from as far back as the

1950s (Brara, 2010).

The specific characteristic of an "item song" is that it is a musical and dance performed by a woman that is immediately, explicitly and intentionally catering to the voyeuristic, heterosexual male gaze (Wazir, 2013). The objectification of women in these songs is romanticised and glorified, starting with the very name "item" being synonymous with "object", and the performing female actresses as "item girls". Scholars argue that this representation of female bodies as a spectacle and an object for sexual consumption in

Bollywood movies is harmful because it reinforces dominant patriarchal norms to millions of Indians (Dasgupta, 1996; Gupta, 2015; Sarkar, 2012). In addition, this hypersexualisation of women to cater to the sexual needs of men in 'item songs' may contribute to normalizing and even, glorifying sexual violence and domestic abuse that is already increasing in Indian (Jain et al., 2019).

It has been shown that listening to violent music frequently creates higher normalisation of the use of violence and higher probability of committing similar

acts of violence (Johnson, Jackson, et al., 2011). Likewise, music that romanticized female sexual submission has been shown to actually increase the females' acceptance of teen dating violence, up to a level of the males' acceptance (Johnson, Adams, et al., 1995). This can also be understood through the lens of Objectification theory which posits that women face acculturation and internalised self-objectification because they internalize an observer's perspective, in this case the media, as a primary view of their physical selves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Popular music is a particularly important source of symbolic models for adolescents and serves as a powerful communication medium, speaking directly to emotions (Wells & Hakanen, 1991). Thus, Indian popular music power, particularly 'item songs' act as an aspirational and symbolic model for adolescents, affecting every aspect of our gendered lives, including our individual intimate relationships. Investigating messages about gender and sexuality in Bollywood item numbers, given the importance that many adolescents place on music in their lives, is important.

The aim of the study is an exploration of

the representation of gendered sexuality in Indian society from 1970 to the present through the lens of Bollywood 'item songs'. Given the vast implications of the consumption of this media on the Indian population, it is extremely valuable to explore this representation in the context of music, sociology and integrated theories. By exploring this topic through the approach of integrated theories of media effects like Sexual Economics Theory and Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation, the topic of gender representation will be understood from a refreshing perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The aim of the study is to explore the representation of females and female sexuality in India from 1970 to the present through the lens of Bollywood 'item songs'. Specifically, in-depth thematic analyses of four well-known Bollywood item songs from different eras extending from 1970 to 2020 were conducted.

Data Collection Procedure

The research began by thinking of ways to narrow down on a sample size of songs to

evaluate. Further, it was important that this sample set was truly representative of consumer choices. To gauge any emerging trends or patterns over time, starting from 1970 to 2020, four songs were chosen.

In order to define popularity, the songs were chosen under the following parameters:

1. Number of YouTube views
2. Mirchi Music Awards/Filmfare Award Nominations/BIG Star Entertainment Awards (National Film Awards)
3. Songs from High Grossing Films (according to box office figures as mentioned on various online websites)

Based on the aforementioned parameters, the following songs were chosen. Firstly, ***Mehbooba Mehbooba*** from the 1975 movie, *Sholay* was chosen to represent the time period 1970-1985. It received 78 million views on YouTube, received critical acclaim receiving the ‘Best Lyrics’, ‘Best Music’ and ‘Best Playback Singer Male Nominations’ in the 23rd Filmfare Awards. The movie *Sholay* is also estimated as the third highest grossing Indian film of all time.

Secondly, ***Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai*** from the 1993 movie, *Khalnayak* was chosen to represent the time period 1986-2000. It received 213 million views on YouTube, received the

‘Best Lyrics’ Nomination and won the ‘Best Playback Singer Award, Female’ in the 39th Filmfare Awards. The movie *Khalnayak* was the fourth highest grossing Indian film of the 1990s.

Thirdly, ***Sheila Ki Jawaani*** from the 2010 movie, *Tees Maar Khan* was chosen to represent the time period 2001-2010. It received 190 million views on YouTube, received the ‘Song Of The Year 2010 - Mirchi Music Award Listeners Choice Award’ and the ‘Best Playback Singer Award, Female’ in the 56th Filmfare Awards.

Fourthly, ***Gandi Baat*** from the 2013 movie, *R...Rajkumar* was chosen to represent the time period 2011-2021. It received 79 million views on YouTube, received BIG Star Entertainment Award nominations for music video with ‘Most Entertaining Dancer’.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was carried out as a method for the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns and themes within data. It was used to organise data, while maintaining rich and detailed descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

The Thematic Analysis involved a three-step process:

1. Familiarization: Each of the four songs were listened to repeatedly and the lyrics were written in Hindi and then translated in English. In order to make certain it was an accurate translation, these lyrics were compared with the

translations on websites such as lyricstranslate.com.

2. Coding: The transcripts of the lyrics were analyzed, first, separately, and then within the wider context of the songs, the era, and Indian society-at-large to identify relevant concepts, patterns and relationships.
3. Generating themes: The clustering of key points derived from the coding process were then used to generate overarching themes that best represented the phenomenon being examined.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1:

Themes extracted from the four songs (N=4)

Theme Lyrics (with translation)

Gender stereotypical representation Paisa, gaadi, mehenga ghar (Money, cars and an expensive house.)

I need a man who can give me all that

Husn ishq ki raahon mein,

Baahon mein, nigaahon mein

(On the road to love and beauty,

In your arms, in your eyes)

Haaye Shaadi Kara Do Meri, Shaadi Kara Do Doli

Saja Do Meri, Doli Saja Do”

([May someone] Get me married

[May someone] Decorate my wedding palanquin).

“A-B-C-D padhli bahut”

(Enough studying the A-B-C-D)

Normalisation of rape culture Ghunghat Gira Ke Chaloon,

Kya Kya Bacha Ke Chaloon”

(I walk hiding my face underneath my veil,

What all should I protect and walk).

Silly silly silly silly boys,

Mujhe follow follow karte hai

(Silly silly silly silly boys, Keep following me)

“Tune bola hatt mawali bhaav nahi diya re”

(Then you said, move away you rowdy person)

“Achhi baatein kar li bahut”

(Enough talking with good manners)

This research study revealed two significant themes that at once illuminate the entrenched nature of the representation of female sexuality in ‘item numbers’. The

subsequent sections will provide a detailed discussion of these two themes:

1. Gender stereotypical representation.
2. Normalisation of rape culture

Theme 1: Gender stereotypical representation

The first theme revealed was *Gender stereotypical representation*, expressing the intrinsic relationship between music and society, and subsequently, the creation and promotion of gender stereotypes. The analysis showed that the selected songs have deep rooted gender stereotypes and stereotyping in their lyrics, making generalisations about the priorities and characteristics of the two genders. This acts as a catalyst in augmenting the already existing gender disparity and gap. The sociology of gender confronts the notion of a predestined feminine-masculine dichotomy. While art may imitate reality, reality often imitates art. If people are constantly presented with stereotypes by the media, then it is very easy to believe in those stereotypes whether subconsciously or consciously, resulting in inevitable disparity.

Moreover, stereotyping through the lens of the Social Identity Theory, theorizes that the 'social comparison' stage results in a perception of Outgroup Homogeneity, particularly with

regard to negative characteristics, which also allows for Positive Distinctiveness (Tajfel, 1974).

The negative gendered stereotyping results in a predicted hostility in intergroup attitudes, and of discrimination towards the out-group. The songs studied in this research frequently stereotyped women as greedy and materialistic in songs like 'Sheila Ki Jawaani':

"Paisa, gaadi, mehenga ghar (Money, cars and an expensive house),

I need a man who can give me all that

Jebein khali phattichar (A poor guy with nothing in his pocket)

No no, I don't like him like that"

Women are pigeonholed as manipulative and scheming; they take advantage of their sexuality to seduce men with their greed for materialistic possessions. This conveys the age-old idea of men as 'providers' and 'breadwinners', whereas the only way for a woman to enjoy a life of luxury and comfort is to marry a wealthy man.

However, this does not mean that these songs solely stereotype women. Although it is true these songs continuously

negatively stereotype women, they also constantly portray men as aggressive and dangerous stalkers instilling fear in women, shown in lyrics such as '*Beedi peeke nukkad pe wait tera kiya re*' (*I smoked cigarette and waited for you at the corner*). This stereotypes men as predators with toxic masculine traits like aggression, violence and sexual danger.

Selected songs also stereotype women as primarily caregivers and housewives whose lives should be centered around and devoted to the men in their lives. This is seen in lines like "*Maine Jawaani Tere Naam Ki*" (I've dedicated my youth to You) and "*Haaye Shaadi Kara Do Meri, Shaadi Kara Do Doli Saja Do Meri, Doli Saja Do*" (*[May someone] Get me married [May someone] Decorate my wedding palanquin*).

This is deleterious for Indian culture because it encourages *stereotype priming*. This is the administration of stimulus that activates group category information, which consequently breeds negative overt practices such as gender based violence and inequality etc (Cobb & Boettcher, 2007). Broadcasting and popularising such behaviours in the media also results in the internalization of

stereotypes.

Furthermore, discrimination, with regard to the evaluation of the physical appeal of men and women, was revealed as an important subtheme. Lyrics often described physical attractiveness (with specific emphasis or description of body parts) as the primary characteristic of women's worth, while financial status was described as the primary characteristic of a man's desirability. Lyrics like '*Ain't nobody got a body like Sheila*', "*Husn ishq ki raahon mein, Baahon mein, nigaahon mein*" (*On the road to love and beauty, In your arms, in your eyes*) clearly reveal this.

This can also be explained through the lens of Sexual Economics theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). It describes heterosexual communities as a marketplace, where men are stereotyped as 'buyers' of sex, and women are stereotyped as 'sellers' of sex. This results in women manipulating and exchanging their primary characteristic of physical beauty and sexuality for men's primary characteristic of money and strength. Beauty-Status Exchange Theory argues that there exists an exchange of men's financial status and occupation for

women's physical attractiveness (Taylor & Glenn, 1976).

However, these structures and differentiations are rooted in patriarchy. It intentionally reinforces male supremacy, and female financial dependence. Additionally, this differentiation is completely unnecessary and unjustified, given that in this modern age, more and more women are acquiring financial independence and hence do not require pleasing or engaging in sexual activities with men to attain financial security. Lines like "*A-B-C-D padhli bahut*" (*Enough studying the A-B-C-D*) also emphasise that women do not need to be educated and that 'attractive' women are unintelligent. This reinforces that a woman's primary characteristic is her physical beauty, and education and intelligence is reserved for the men.

Consequently, the portrayal of these gendered criteria of attractiveness not only ignores but tries to erase the progress made with regards to gender equality, both financially and culturally. Moreover, such differentiations are problematic because overemphasis of the media on unrealistic beauty standards leads to increased stereotyping, leaner body standards

and increased eating disorder symptomatology (Harrison, 2000). Similarly, stereotyping men as desirable based on their wealth and occupation, sends inappropriate and harmful messages. It also leads to classist attitudes.

Theme 2: Normalisation of rape culture

The second theme emerging from the data was the normalisation of rape culture.

Susan Griffin's (1979) succinct statement "I have never been free of the fear of rape." sums up the poignant sentiments of every woman in the world. The erotization of male dominance and aggression, and subsequent prioritisation of male sexual needs and pleasure breeds a culture where it is often very difficult to differentiate "normal" heterosexual relations and rape. Rape culture is a sociological theory of a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality (Mkhize et al., 2020).

The thematic analysis of chosen item songs expressed the supposed 'heroism' and 'masculinity' of the continued pursuit

of women despite her rejection or disinterest. These songs wrongfully praise the refutation of rejection and glorify unrequited love and pursuits as a right of the man to acquire his object.

Lines of the song 'Gandi Baat' illustrate this:

"Raja beta banke maine jab sharafat dikhai" (When I showed my innocence like a good guy) *"Tune bola hatt mawali bhaav nahi diya re"* (Then you said, move away you rowdy person) *"Achhi baatein kar li bahut"* (Enough talking with good manners)

It romanticizes the men ignoring boundaries and consent of women (*Then you said, move away you rowdy person*). It also encourages the idea that when experiencing opposition or refusal from women, men should resort to verbal and physical aggression (*Enough talking with good manners*) to convince women. The reason that 'No' secretly means 'Yes' presents itself. This sub theme is particularly seen in the line *"Dikhne mein thi tu kadak, Dheere dheere pighli bahut"* (*You looked very strict, But you slowly melted*). The theme was continually seen in the chosen songs and

propagates that refusal, especially from women, is a twisted representation of unexpressed interest or desire, of something that will "slowly melt". This goes so far as to depict women displaying rejection as a way to challenge and assess the integrity and perseverance of their man.

The Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation displays the Dis-inhibitory effect: that rewarding a forbidden behavior in the media increases its likelihood of being observed, learned and in turn demonstrated by the people who consume the media (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Thus, each 'item song' that depicts heroines rewarding the hero with her love even when he ignores her initial rejection and boundaries, adds on and on to the existing problem that Indian society faces: 'no secretly means yes' (Siddiqi, 2020).

Rape culture has adverse effects on society, particularly for survivors. The stigmatisation of rape prevents survivors from sharing their stories, and traps them by encouraging their silence. This is also caused by a culture of victim blaming and gaslighting where survivors are judged as being responsible for the assault, and can

even make them question and doubt their own experience. A sociological theory of gaslighting argues that gaslighting is a gendered phenomenon, where perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities and institutional vulnerabilities against victims to manipulate their realities and situations to be surreal. They employ the association of femininity with irrationality (Sweet, 2019). Specific statements such as “*they asked for it*”, “*it wasn't really rape*”, “*that is harmless, they didn't mean to*” or “*you must not remember correctly*” are common ways to gaslight individuals and internalise the idea that the victim deserves to be blamed, while invalidating their trauma. Thus, the normalisation of rape culture in Bollywood media is especially harmful, as it alienates survivors and increases rate of crime and sexual assault. It leads to millions of women feeling isolated and trapped, destroying their sense of reality, identity or ability to report incidents to law enforcement or academic institutions.

This is evident in lines like “*Ghunghat Gira Ke Chaloon, Kya Kya Bacha Ke Chaloon*” (I walk hiding my face underneath my veil, What all should I

protect and walk). This emphasises the idea that women are responsible for ‘inviting’ rape and should practice modesty like “hiding my face underneath my veil” and “protect” themselves from male actions. This breeds a culture of perpetual fear and lurking of the fear of rape.

Stalking is the intentional, malicious pattern of following and harassment that causes a person to feel afraid or in danger (Meloy & Gothard, 1995). Lines like “*Beedi peeke nukkad pe wait tera kiya re*” (*I was smoking a cigarette and waiting for you at the crossroads*) romanticizes and glorifies stalking and harassment, and presents it as the right of a male lover. A subject-object binary is established where the male asserts his dominance by demonstrating that he is the Subject and this song is his narrative; he justifies his right to tease the Object. Women are identified with reference to men. Men become the Absolute, women are simply the Other. The female here as portrayed by is a sex Object, a mere temptress who gratifies the sexual needs of the man (Beauvoir, 1949). Exhibiting women and the ‘item girls’ as objects also dehumanises them and presents them

without valid emotions and boundaries, making it easier to justify harassment, coerced consent and rape.

In addressing the potential scope for improvement of the evolution of the expression of female sexuality in 'item songs', a glimmer of hope can be identified. More recent songs like *Sheila ki Jawaani* may posit that women in item songs are moving towards being active agents with erotic desire, and not passive objects of the male gaze in lines like "*Kisi aur ki mujhko zaroorat kya, Main toh khud se pyar jataun*" (*I don't need anyone else, I'll express my love to myself*). These female performers 'item girls' are now openly expressive of their own beauty, desires and sexuality, replacing the stigma of immodesty and indecency. They have autonomy over their sexuality, and now have the power of choice and decision regarding their body. This is seen in "*Main tere haath na aani*" (*I will never come in your hands*) and "*I know you want it but you never gonna get it*".

Lines like "*Silly silly silly silly boys; Mujhe follow follow karte hai* (*Silly silly silly silly boys, Keep following me*) present two angles to the theme. It shows a normalisation of men acting as a

'predator' following the woman as a 'prey'. However, the use of the word 'silly' has a mocking and condescending tone. It presents the item girl with the ultimate power and awareness, being able to see men as wild animals unable to control their lust but herself as controlled. However, expressing women, particularly 'item girls' as powerful solely due to their sexuality and attractiveness as validated by men, can also be regressive.

Conclusion

The discussion of these two themes has provided a complex picture of how Bollywood 'item songs' represent female sexuality, and thus influence socio-cultural beliefs and behaviors. Upon analysis of these four 'item songs', it was revealed that these songs share various themes. The glorification of stalking as a twisted way of expressing "love" may increase male entitlement and aggression; this displays men not respecting women's rejection as a right of their masculinity (Siddiqi, 2020). Stereotyping widens the gender based power imbalance and contributes to normalisation of toxic masculinity. Behaviours like stalking, harassing, refusing to take 'no' for an answer and aggression are presented as chivalrous and

heroic, which contributes to rape culture and increased acts of sexual abuse.

Furthermore, female representation and its objectification, hypersexualisation and victim results in misogyny and stereotyping threat. The hypersexualisation and fixation on women's physical appearance and bodies leads to unrealistic body standards and expectations, which could result in psychological disorders related to eating and body dysphoria. They project a one-dimensional, distorted image of women. This can also increase power and control of affluent men, who may be more likely to take advantage of and sexualise young, poor women. This can lead to harmful practices like sexual 'grooming'.

While film directors may have no incentive to regulate their use of objectifying 'item songs', federal restrictions and warnings, similar to those that govern the tobacco and alcohol industries, should be explored as a means to protect public mental and physical health. In conclusion, our findings indicate serious concerns for the Indian society because item songs further notions regarding gender roles, sexuality,

perpetuate stereotypes, misogynistic attitudes, and hegemonic idealizations of female body while normalizing sexual violence and objectification of women. Indian society is historically beautiful and has a myriad of traditions and values that contribute to our emphasis on cultural rootedness. However, in attempts to grapple with some harmful beliefs and their far reaching consequences, while adopting shreds of modernity, open-mindedness and liberalism, the historic tradition of 'item songs' in India's biggest movie industry adds a layer of complexity that will continue to have serious consequences for the Indian society.

Limitations

Although this study provided a rich and detailed, yet complex account of qualitative data, the sample size is small, limited to four songs, which limits transferability. Secondly, since the data has not been categorized based on genres, the scope of comparative findings is limited.

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